

Mahaka Pāṭihāriya Sutta

The Discourse on Mahaka's Miracle

[The psychic miracles of the monk Mahaka]

(Saṃyutta Nikāya 41.4/4:288-291)

Translated by Piya Tan ©2008

1 Introduction

1.1 Mahaka. The character Mahaka appears only twice in the entire Pāli Canon: once as a novice in the Vinaya, and the another as the protagonist in **the Mahaka Pāṭihāriya Sutta**. In the Vinaya, Mahaka is the name of a novice who is caught committing a lewd act with another novice, Kaṇṭaka. We have a record of the two in **the Kaṇṭaka Vatthu** (Mv 1.52):

Now at that time, the venerable Upananda, the young Shakya, had two novices, Kaṇṭaka and Mahaka. They committed an evil act (*dūsesum*)¹ with one another. Monks frowned upon, criticized, spread it about, saying: “How can these novices indulge in such a bad habit?” They told this matter to the Blessed One. Regarding this matter, the Blessed One said:

“Monks, one (a monk) should not be attended to by two novices. Whoever does so commits an offence of wrong-doing (*dukkaṭa*).”

*Tena kho pana samayena āyasmato upanandassa sakyaputtassa dve sāmaṇerā honti—
kaṇṭako ca mahako ca. Te aññam-aññam dūsesum. Bhikkhū ujjhāyanti khiyyanti vipācenti—
kathaṃ hi nāma sāmaṇerā evarūpaṃ anācāraṃ ācarissantī ti. Bhagavato etam atthaṃ ārocesum:
Na, bhikkhave, ekena dve sāmaṇerā upaṭṭhāpetabbā. Yo upaṭṭhāpeyya, āpatti dukkaṭassā ti.
(Mv 1.52 = V 1:79; Kaṇṭaka Sikkhāpada, Pāc 70 = V 4:139,18-34)*

According to **the Pācittiya 50** account (V 4:139), Kaṇṭaka (evidently the initiator of the vile act) was expelled.² Like Ariṭṭha, as recorded in **the Alagaddūpama Sutta** (M 22), Kaṇṭaka claims, “As I understand the Dharma taught by the Blessed One, those things called obstructions by the Blessed One are not able to obstruct one who indulges in them,” implying that it is all right for monastic (including novices) to indulge in sex.³ This wrong view is unequivocally rejected by the Buddha.⁴

From the Vinaya accounts, we know that only Kaṇṭaka is expelled from the order (V 4:138). Nothing is said of Mahaka. There is no clear evidence that this Mahaka of the Vinaya and the Mahaka of the Sutta—these are the only two occasions we see this name—are the same individual. Even if it is the same individual, Mahaka is probably misled by Kaṇṭaka, later is rehabilitated by the monks, goes into solitary retreat and attains a spiritual level of at least the fourth dhyana, which accounts for psychic powers. Or, they could well be two different individuals.

1.2 Monastics and miracles. The discourses of the Citta Saṃyutta (S 41) generally present **Citta the householder** not only as a wise layman, but also as one who is full of faith and very devoted to the monks. The Mahaka Pāṭihāriya Sutta, for example, shows Citta's devotion to Mahaka after seeing him

¹ IB Horner translates this as “sodomy” (V:H 4:99), but the word simply means “that which is evil,” and as such could refer to any kind of sexual act.

² He is said to have seduced a nun (V 1:85). Comy calls those like Kaṇṭaka, Ariṭṭha and the Vajji,puttakas of Vesālī, on account of their “perverted views” (*viparīta,dassana*), enemies of the Teaching (*sāsana,paccatthika*). Those who are their own enemies (*atta,paccatthika*) are those like the group of monks led by Mettiya and Bhumma-jaka, and the Licchavī layman Vaḍḍha, who made false accusations of the sexual act against Dabba Malla,putta (V 3:166 ff, 4:37 f; VA 874, 582; UA 431, 434).

³ The Kaṇṭaka of Mv 1.52 and of Pāc 70 are clearly the same person (pace IB Horner, 4:99 n4), as the lewd act of the former and the wrong view of the latter are essentially related.

⁴ M 22.6/1:132 = SD 3.13 & V 4:138-140 (Pāc 70).

perform miracles, but the sutta ends rather mysteriously. We are simply told that Mahaka goes away for good. [2.2]

Elsewhere, we have discussed the Buddhist attitude towards miracles.⁵ So here a few key remarks would suffice. Firstly, *a miracle happens because it can happen*. A miracle may seem to go against some natural law, but it is a law that we do not understand or not yet understand.⁶ Secondly, *a miracle is not a mark of spirituality*. Let's say if someone could turn water into oil (or some other miracle you can think of), and then the person declares, "Now believe what I say: *(Insert claim here)!*" The point is that what the person *does* and what he *says* here are not really related at all! Any connection is either based on the miracle-worker's delusion, or your own perception. If miracles (such as healing) do work, why show it off only to attract followers: why not heal the numerous sick and suffering in hospitals and hospices, where such "miracles" are badly needed?

Another interesting point is that if the religious miracles claimed by the various religions (including Buddhism) are true, *how come we do not find a single independent historical record of any of them in other writings of those times?* One possible answer is that these "miracles" are *attributed* (by way of charisma)⁷ to the religious teacher.

Most importantly, miracles, or more properly, the claim and belief in miracles, are really the assertion of "lordship" or desire for power over others. This is a desperate move in a situation where other means of gaining power is unavailable or less effective. The best explanation here, insofar as we do see some kind of superhuman feat, is that *the human mind is capable of much more than we think*.⁸

In early Buddhism, as stated in **the (Pāṭihāriya) Saṅgārava Sutta** (A 3.60), the greatest miracle is not that of psychic power, but of *education*.⁹ The reason for this is that in the case of a miracle, it "only the one who performs it, experiences it: it belongs only to the one who performs it. Indeed, this miracle seems like *it is related to the false dharma of illusion*" but in the case of "the miracle of education" (*anusāsanī, pāṭihāriya*), much more people, even a whole culture, benefits from it.¹⁰

1.3 Mahaka's miracles. The Mahaka Pāṭihāriya Sutta records two miracles performed by the monk Mahaka, namely,

- (1) the weather miracle: "so that a cool wind blew, a canopy of clouds gathered, and the sky drizzled a bit" [§10]; and
- (2) the fire miracle: "Then the venerable Mahaka, having entered his dwelling and bolted the door, performed an act of superhuman miraculous power, such that fire shot through the keyhole and the chinks in the door, but neither the grass nor the cloak was burnt." [§16].

We know from the Sutta, that the first miracle is performed by Mahaka (the juniormost of them) with the consent of the elder monks. Of special interest in his second miracle, which is performed on the invitation of Citta the householder. It appears to be a fire-kasiṇa miracle, but the fire does not burn the grass on the cloak.

As such, it is likely here to be a mental holographic projection (*nimmāna*), like when the Buddha projected holographic images of a beautiful young woman (*abhirūpaṃ itthim nimmini*) fanning him, and

⁵ **Kevaḍḍha S** (D 11) = SD 1.7 Intro (3).

⁶ Take eg the various miracles of Christ mentioned in the Bible, we find them mentioned in the early Buddhist scripture, some 500 years before. All such miracles have been defined in a pericope (eg **Sāmañña,phala S**, D 2.89/-1:77 f = SD 8.10). Many of these miracles, such as walking on water and transmutation of matter, are explainable by the *kasiṇa* meditation: see **Bhāvanā** = SD 15.1 (9.2).

⁷ See **The Teacher or the Teaching?** = SD 3.14 & Piyasilo, *Charisma in Buddhism*, 1992h, available online: <http://pali.house.googlepages.com/Piyasilo.CharismainBuddhism.pdf>.

⁸ This applies to the staging of gospel "healing" realities: if such healings really work, we should invite them to the old folks' homes, the hospital intensive care units and the institutes of mental health to heal the patients there, so that they truly provide public service that is most commendable!

⁹ A 3.60.6c/1:172 = SD 16.10.

¹⁰ A 3.60.6c/1:172 = SD 16.10.

she appears to progress rapidly—as if in a time-lapse movie—through the stages of youth, maturity, decay, death, and after death, so that as queen Khemā watches, samvega arises in her.¹¹

Buddhaghosa makes a special mention of Mahaka’s miracle in his Visuddhi,magga, where in his classification of miracles, he puts Mahaka’s fire miracle shown to Citta the householder in the same class as the Buddha’s “invisibility” miracle performed before the Brahmā Baka, Brahmā’s host, and Brahmā’s retinue (and the invisible Māra), as recorded in **the Brahmā,nimantanika Sutta** (M 49).¹² In both cases, only the miracle is seen, but not the miracle worker.¹³

2 Some key sentences

2.1 “You speak kindly, householder” (*kalyāṇam vuccati*) [§18]. When Citta the householder proposes that he would offer the four requisites (“robe, almsfood, lodging, and medical support and supplies for the sick”), Mahaka replies: “You speak kindly, householder” (*kalyāṇam vuccati, gahapati’ ti*) [§18]. There are only two other occurrences of this sentence in the Suttas, that is, in **the Isidatta Sutta 2** (S 41.3), which precedes the Mahaka Pāṭihāriya Sutta, and in **the Ambaṭṭha Sutta** (D 3). **FL Woodward** interprets *kalyāṇam vuccati* (S 4:291,7) as a “formula for polite refusal, acceptance always being by silence,” S:W 4:196 n2).¹⁴

The Ambaṭṭha Sutta (D 3) closes with these words by the brahmin Ambaṭṭha, who has just attained streamwinning and taken the Three Refuges, then declares:

“...And just as the master Gotama approaches other families of lay followers at Ukkaṭṭhā, even so let the master Gotama approach the family of Pokkhara,sāti. Those brahmin youths and brahmin maidens who will pay homage to the master Gotama, or will present him with a seat or with water, or will look at him with bright faith, it will thereby for their benefit and happiness for a long time!”

[Blessed One:] “You speak kindly, brahmin!”

(D 3.2.22/1:110) = SD 21.3

Evidently, the Buddha sees no need to be given such luxurious services reminiscent of a palatial or high-class life. Hence, he gives a polite reply without committing himself. It can therefore be concluded that, in the Mahaka Pāṭihāriya Sutta, Mahaka’s answer of “You speak kindly, householder” is a polite rejection of the invitation. The customary way that a monastic would consent to such an invitation is by remaining silent [§3] [2.2].

Other similar contexts and usages of *kalyāṇa* are found in the Commentaries. In **the Mahā,janaka Jātaka**, for example, Mahā,janaka (the Bodhisattva) thanks the ascetic Narada for his admonition by saying, “It’s very good of you, sir!” (*kalyāṇam vata maṃ bhavam*, J 539/6:58,5*), and then asks for the ascetic’s name.

In another commentarial story—given in the Sāmyutta Commentary and the Dhammapada Commentary—a brahmin, out of deep faith, declares that his two sons will make regular meal-offerings to the Buddha, who replies: “That is good, brahmin, but we will go as we please” (*kalyāṇam brāhmaṇa, mayam pana ruccan’atthānam eva gamissāmā’ti*, SA 1:263,2); “That is good, brahmin, but please do not assign to an individual: for, we will go only as we please” (*kalyāṇam brāhmaṇa, pāṭiyekkaṃ pana mā niyyādehi; mayam pana ruccan’atthānam eva gamissāmā’ti*, DhA 4:11). A brahmin expresses his desire that his two sons will make regular meal-offering (*dhuva,bhatta*), too. Here, too, we see the Buddha making a polite rejection or modification to the invitation. In other contexts, however, found only in the Commentaries, *kalyāṇa* has the sense of approval and acceptance:

¹¹ AA 1:343 f; DhA 24.5/4:56-59.

¹² M 49.26/1:330 = SD 11.7.

¹³ Vism 12.85 f/393 f.

¹⁴ Comy points out that the words for the offering of the four requisites—*catūhi paccayehi paṭijaggissāmī’ti*—are faultless and blameless (*vacanaṃ niddosaṃ anavajjāṃ vuccati tayā*, SA 3:92,7).

- “Being of the same mind, they said to all of them, ‘What you have said is good.’” (*te “kalyāṇam tumhehi vuttan” ti sabbe pi eka, cittā hutvā*, AA 1:256,23). The princes, younger brothers of the Buddha Phussa, on their consensus to request the rajah Mahinda that they be the supporters of the Buddha.
- “She speaks well” (*kalyāṇam esā kathetī ti*, AA 1:413,10 = DhA 1: 401,22). The seth Migāra, of the lady Sujātā’s remarks.
- “Devadatta speaks what is good” (*kalyāṇam Devadatto āha*, DhA 1:142,2). Unwise monks, of Devadatta’s proposals of five strict rules to the Buddha.
- “Excellent, my queen, what you have said is good” (*sādhu devi kalyāṇan te kathitan’ti*, DhA 3:185,6). Rajah Pasenadi, of his queen Mallikā’s proposal to make the giving beyond compare.

2.2 Mahaka leaves Macchikā,saṅḍa “for good.” The Mahaka Pāṭikāriya Sutta is not the only discourse where a monk, after being extended lay patronage, quietly leaves for good. We see a similar situation in **the Isidatta Sutta 2** (S 41.3), where the elder Isidatta shows his skill in answering Dharma questions, which impresses Citta, who extends to Isi,datta the same invitation. Neither the Sutta’s commentary nor the subcommentary offers any explanation. **Bodhi** offers the explanation that “he may have seen the danger in fame and honour and preferred to dwell in complete anonymity” (S:B 1441 n293).

In both cases—the accounts of Isidatta and of Mahaka—it is Citta the householder who extends the patronage to these monks on account of their special abilities. Isi,datta is a capable teacher, while Mahaka has great psychic powers. Apparently, the story of Mahaka’s display of *iddhi* power before a layman, Citta the householder, occurs early in the Buddha’s ministry, that is, before Citta has attained non-return¹⁵ and before the rule forbidding a monastic’s public display of *iddhi*.

The monastic rule against the display of *iddhi* before the laity by monastics is introduced in connection with **Piṇḍola Bhāradvāja**.¹⁶ The case story, found in the Culla,vagga of **the Vinaya**, recounts it in some detail. A Rājagaha seth places an almsbowl on a high pole of extended bamboos. Piṇḍola succeeds in bringing the almsbowl down and is rewarded by the seth, who fills the bowl with choice food. The whole city is abuzz with talk of the miracle, and when the Buddha learns of this he shows his unequivocal disapproval in the strongest terms, that it is like a woman exposing herself for money, and that monastics should never display their psychic powers in public!¹⁷ Thus the Cullavagga (Cv 5.8.2) records the rule that *forbids monks from displaying feats of psychic power to lay people* (the breach of which entails the offence of “wrong-doing” or *dukkata*):

Bhikshus, a superhuman psychic miracle should not be shown to householders. For whom-ever shows it, there is the offence of wrong-doing. Bhikshus, break the wooden bowl into small fragments, and then give them to the monks as scent-mixed ointment.¹⁸ And, bhikshus, a wooden bowl should not be used. (Cv 5.8.2 = V 2:110 f)¹⁹

It can be deduced from the Sutta that, at that time, it is very likely the rule forbidding monastics performing miracles before the laity has not yet been promulgated. If the rule were already in force, then surely the Sutta would not have presented the whole story in a relaxed manner.

¹⁵ See **Acela Kassapa S 2** (S 41.9.8/4:301) = SD 45.3.

¹⁶ For details on Piṇḍola, see **Piṇḍola Bhāradvāja** (S 35.127/4:110-113) = SD 27.6.

¹⁷ Cv 5.8 = V 2:110 f.

¹⁸ Cf V 1:203 where sandalwood is one of the five perfumes (*añjan’upapisana*) allowable.

¹⁹ See also Cv 5.37 = V 2:143; cf Niss 21.3 = V 3:243 (V:H 2:115 & = nn1-2), Pāc 40.2.1 = V 4:123 (V:H 2:415 n1). Interestingly, we do find, in **(Pasāda,kampana) Moggallāna S**, the Buddha instructing Moggallāna to use his powers to shake up Migāra’s Mansion wherein some monks are cavorting on the second floor (S 51.14/-5:269-271 = SD 27.9), and the Buddha himself occasionally performing miraculous feats publicly, such as when crossing the Ganges on his last journey (D 2.1.33/2:89) = SD 9. The V Comy says that it is the miracle (*vikubban’iddhi,pāṭihāriya*) that is objected to, not the psychic power that is volitional in nature (*adhiṭṭhān’iddhi*) (VA 1203). See **Piṇḍola Bhāradvāja S** (S 35.127/4:110-113) = SD 27.6.

Secondly, it is unlikely that the monks walking back after Citta's meal offering were unaware that Citta was following, so that Mahaka unwittingly performs his miracle to change the weather [§§9-11]. If this were the case, then he would have refused to perform a fire miracle at his cell upon the request of Citta [§15-18a], informing him of the monastic prohibition.

Then, when Citta the householder, filled with samvega, invites Mahaka to stay in the wild mango park in Macchikā,saṇḍa. Mahaka politely refuses [§18b]. Most significantly, the Mahaka Pāṭihāriya Sutta (like the Isidatta Sutta 2) closes with Mahaka tidying up his cell, and then leaving Macchikā,saṇḍa for good: "When he left Macchika,saṇḍa, it was for good, and he never returned." [§19]

GP Malalasekera, in his *Dictionary of Pali Proper Names* (1938), simply says that Mahaka went away for good "because he did not wish to enjoy gains won by a display of *iddhi*-power" (sv Mahaka Sutta). **Thanissaro**, in his translation of the Mahaka Pāṭihāriya Sutta, helpfully summarizes what has been discussed here:

There is no way of knowing whether the incident in this sutta predated or postdated the formulation of that rule, but this story illustrates the reason for that rule: If word of Ven Mahaka's display of psychic power became known among lay people, they would pester him for more displays and he would know no peace. At the same time, he would attract their alms, perhaps to the detriment of the other monks. That's why he had to leave for good.

(<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn41/sn41.004.than.html>)

From the Suttas, we can deduce, or at least surmise, that Mahaka is a conscientious monk, who wants to ensure that nothing distracts him from his monastic training. This is obvious from **the Lābha,sakkāra Sāmyutta** (S 17/2:225-243), which contains 43 discourses, most of which centre around the statement,

Dreadful [Terrible], bhikshus, are gain, honour, and praise, bitter, vile obstructive to attaining the supreme safety from bondage.

*Dāruṇo bhikkhave lābha,sakkāra,sīloko kaṭuko pharuso antarāyiko anuttarassa yoga-k,-
khemassa adhigamāya.* (S 17/2:225-243)

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The Discourse on Mahaka's Miracle

(S 41.4/4:288-291)

1 At one time, a number of elder monks were staying in the wild mango park (*ambaṭaka, vana*) near Macchikā,saṅḍa. [289]

Citta the householder offer almsfood to the monks

2 Then Citta the householder approached those elder monks, saluted them, and sat down at one side.

3 Seated thus at one side, Citta the householder said this to the elder monks:
“Bhante, might the elders accept tomorrow's meal from me in my cowshed?”²⁰
The elder monks consented by their silence.²¹

4 Then Citta the householder, having understood that the elder monks have consented, rose from his seat and, keeping his right side to them, departed.

5 When the night had passed, the monks dressed themselves early in the morning, and taking robe and bowl, went to the cowshed of Citta the householder. There, they sat down on the prepared seats.

6 Then, Citta the householder, with his own hands, served and satisfied the elder monks with delicious milk-rice mixed with ghee.

7 When the elder monks had finished eating and taken their hands out of their bowls, they rose from their seats and departed.

Citta the householder, having said, “Give away the remains,” followed closely behind the elder monks.

Mahaka performs a miracle

8 Now at that time, the heat was excessive,²² and the elders went along as if their bodies were melting because of the food they had taken.

9 Now at that time, the venerable Mahaka was the most junior²³ of the monks in the order. Then, the venerable Mahaka said this to a venerable elder:

“It would be good, bhante elder, if a cool wind were to blow, if there were a canopy of clouds, and if the sky would drizzle a bit!”

“That would be good indeed, avuso Mahaka!”²⁴

10 Then the venerable Mahaka performed a miracle, [290] so that a cool wind blew, a canopy of clouds gathered, and the sky drizzled a bit.

11 Then it occurred to Citta the householder,
“Such is the spiritual power of this monk, the juniormost in the order!”

12 Then, when the venerable Mahaka arrived at the monastery, he said this to the venerable elder:
“Bhante elder, is this much enough?”

“Avuso, this much is enough. What has been done is sufficient, avuso Mahaka, what's been offered is sufficient, avuso Mahaka!”

13 Then the monks went to their respective dwellings, and the venerable Mahaka went to his own.

²⁰ *Adhivāsentu me, bhante therā, svātanāya go,kule bhattan'ti.* Here, *adhivāsentu* is imper 3 pl. (1) The sg form is *~etu me (bhante bhagavā, etc) svātanāya bhattaṃ* (generally followed by aor *~esi kho bhagavā, etc, tuṅhī, bhāvena*), D 1:109,23 (= *sampaṭicchatu*, DA, ie *sādiyatu*, PT), 226,2, 2:97,12; M 1: 236,12, 2:50,1; V 1:17,28; Sn p103,24; *~etu no bhante bhagavā āvasath āgāraṃ*, D 2:84,19. (2) *~etu me bhante bhagavā Bārāṇasiyaṃ vassāvāsāṃ*, M 2:-50,24).

²¹ *Adhivāsesuṃ kho therā bhikkhū tuṅhī, bhāvena.* See prec n.

²² *Tena kho pana samayena uṅhaṃ hoti kuthitaṃ.*

²³ *Sabba, navaka*, lit “all-new,” ie the juniormost.

²⁴ *Sādhu khv-assa, āvuso mahaka.*

Citta invites Mahaka to perform a miracle

14 Then, Citta the householder approached the venerable Mahaka, saluted him and sat down at one side.

15 Seated thus at one side, Citta the householder said this to the venerable Mahaka:

“It would be good, bhante, if the noble (*ayya*) Mahaka were to show me an act of superhuman miraculous power.”²⁵

“In that case, householder, spread your upper robe [cloak] upon the verandah and scatter a bundle of grass upon it.”

16 Then the venerable Mahaka, having entered his dwelling and bolted the door, performed an act of superhuman miraculous power, such that fire shot through the keyhole and the chinks in the door, but neither the grass nor the cloak was burnt.²⁶

17 Then Citta the householder, having shaken off his cloak, stood at one side, filled with samvega²⁷ and his hair bristling [horripilating].²⁸

18a Then the venerable Mahaka came out of his dwelling, and said this to Citta the householder:

“Householder, is this much enough?” **[291]**

“Bhante Mahaka, this much is enough. What has been done is sufficient, bhante Mahaka, what’s been offered is sufficient, bhante Mahaka!

18b Let the noble Mahaka delight in the pleasant wild mango park near Macchikā,saṇḍa. I will make every effort to provide the noble Mahaka with robe, almsfood, lodging, and medical support and supplies for the sick.”

“You speak kindly, householder.”²⁹

19 Then the elder Mahaka put his lodging in order and, taking robe and bowl, left Macchikā,saṇḍa. When he left Macchika,saṇḍa, it was for good, and he never returned.³⁰

— evaṃ —

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²⁵ *Sādhū me, bhante, ayyo mahako uttari manussa, dhammaṃ iddhi, pāṭihāriyaṃ dassētū ’ti.* See Intro (2).

²⁶ See Intro (1.3).

²⁷ See **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16) = SD 9 Intro (7f).

²⁸ *Atha kho citto gahapati uttarā, saṅgam papphotetvā saṃviggo loma, haṭṭha, jāto ekam-antaṃ aṭṭhāsi.*

²⁹ *Kalyāṇaṃ vuccati, gahapati ’ti.* See Intro (2.1).

³⁰ *Yaṃ macchikā, saṇḍamhā pakkāmi, tathā pakkanto ’va ahosi, na puna paccāgacchi.* Here, *pakkāmi* is the preterite (simple past)³⁰ aspect of *pakkamati* (“he goes away”) (M 1:105; Pug 58; DA 1:94; PvA 13). See Intro (2.2).